

# Counterfeiters Gave Greeks A Bad Name

By Steve Frangos

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Ongoing abuse by a variety of native-born Americans against all newly arrived Greek immigrants of the 1880-1920 era can not be questioned. But then again, neither can we deny the criminal action of a select number of Greek immigrants. We can no longer simply ignore this group of individuals. These persons saw much news coverage, and their actions were often projected onto all other Greek immigrants. If we completely ignore these individuals and their undisputed crimes, then much of the negative press Greek immigrants received during this era becomes impossible to understand.

Initially, these reported crimes were common enough. On 13 December 1891, "Baroness Elizabeth de Blanc, who was staying at the Albemarle Hotel, dropped her gold purse on the sidewalk as she entered the hotel on Tuesday. Two boys said they saw Darwistus Nicolson, a Greek peddler, pick it up. They ran after him, but he denied that he had the purse. The boys told the Baroness about it, but the Greek still denied having it. He was arrested, and Justice Hogan at the Jefferson Market Police Court held him for \$500 bail. The purse was valued at \$290 and contained \$10 (New York Times)."

Various other crimes were reported to involve Greek immigrants during this early era. But no crime associated with Greek immigrants is as unexpected as the one they were first associated with in the late 1880's and very early 1890's: counterfeiting.

On 18 December 1889, we learn that "Hadci Gyuma, an unsophisticated Greek, smiling and bland, came to this country a year ago and engaged in the business of selling alleged Persian confectionery to a confiding public. Business has lagged somewhat of late, and Hadci thought that dealing in 'queer' coin of Uncle Sam's issue held out

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possibilities for a fortune that discounted anything he might expect from confectionery. He accordingly put in a plant in his room at 170 Bowery. The business prospered, and the secret coiner found a good market for his spurious issue among the peddlers of his acquaintance. It was the most natural channel for imposing on the public, and Hadci and his coadjutors 'shoved the queer' successfully for a time. The Secret Service Department, however, soon discovered the business which Hadci was doing under the guise of an itinerant confectioner, and an investigation was ordered. It took Special Officer John O'Donnell but a very little while to find out that Hadci was coining bogus money, and was circulating it through the fakirs, who made a pretense of selling candy. When he was arrested at his lodgings yesterday, he was very much surprised, or pretended to be. Officer O'Donnell took him into custody, and he was locked up in default of \$1,000 bail (New York Times)."

Then, on 17 December 1894, "The Secret Service officers raided the premises at 43 Oliver Street last night and arrested two Greeks named James and Lewis Laeonedici as counterfeiters. The officers found the whole paraphernalia necessary for the making of spurious coin. The men were locked up in Ludlow Street Jail (New York Times)."

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Leaving aside all other reports, on 7 December 1896, we finally come to George Polycramis, the criminal dubbed "Greek George" by the police and the press: "Secret Service Agents on Saturday afternoon arrested three supposed counterfeiters and seized paraphernalia for making spurious coin. The prisoners, who will be before Commissioner Shields today, are George Polycramis, 26; Charles Pappas, 29, of 21 Chrystie Street, and Julia Johnson, 29. Polycramis and the Johnson woman live at 28 Chrystie Street. The agents had

ing was a 'perfect' crime for Greeks then because it was nearly impossible to backtrack where the spurious coins were first entered into the stream of daily cash flow.

But Greek George was not on the loose long. One inspector, who had been on Polycramis' trail for months, finally caught up with the Greek outlaw. The public then learns that "Inspector George W. Hazen of New York left Chicago this evening (August 10) with George Polycramis, otherwise known as 'Greek George,' a counterfeiter of international reputation (New York Times, August 11, 1897)... Polycramis, the counterfeiter who escaped... in January with two other prisoners... reached this city yesterday in the custody of (Inspector Haven), and was taken to Ludlow Street Jail. He was expecting to leave Chicago for Colorado on Wednesday when he was captured (New York Times, August 13, 1897)."

It was understood that Polycramis was "noted as much for his daring and desperate nature, as for his skill as a counterfeiter," while it was also accepted that Greek George "was the leader of a gang which had flooded New York with spurious coin and which, for a long time, evaded the efforts of department agents to capture the counterfeiters (New York Times)," but his entire gang may not have been caught.

Much of the mystery of precisely who was in this counterfeiting gang centers around the possibility that other Greek criminals not in the gang, but who had knowledge of its actions, made an ill-fated move against those not initially captured by the Secret Service.

We know that on 3 June 1899, "Nicholas Cotsobelas, a Greek residing at 139 East 13th Street, was arrested yesterday morning by Secret Service Agents Henry, Brown and Tyrrell at 101 Greenwich Street, where he was caught in the act of making counterfeit half and quarter dollars. The Secret Service officers had to break through the door of the room where Cotsobelas was working. The room was small and dark. Cotsobelas, who had hardly any clothing on, was sitting beside a red-hot stove, on which was a kettle filled with molten metal, which he used in making the bogus coin. Two Plaster-of-Paris molds, one for half dollars and one for quarter dollars, were found. In the quarter dollar mold rested an unfinished counter-

been following the movements of the prisoners for several months, and the principal evidence they have against them was the alleged passing of bogus quarter and dime pieces. The agents found a plant of molds, metal and crucibles. More than 50 quarter pieces were found. The men are Greeks (New York Times)."

The next day, the New York Times reported that Polycramis and Pappas were being held on \$5,000 bail each. Julia Johnson, who was being held on \$500 bail, had apparently turned state's witness. Yet somehow, Polycramis escaped, though his partners in crime were not so lucky.

Finally, on 1 April 1897, April Fool's Day, "Charles Pappas, accused of having made and passed counterfeit ten-cent pieces, was found guilty in the United States Court yesterday. His partner in the ownership of the counterfeiting plant at 28 Chrystie Street, George Polycramis, was among the prisoners who escaped from Ludlow Street Jail recently, and has not been recaptured. Pappas and Polychronis passed large numbers of the spurious coins among pushcart men and in small stores on the east side (New York Times)."

The key phrase here is, "passed large numbers of the spurious coins among pushcart men and in small stores." Given the very nature of the pushcart and small storefront businesses, vast amounts of coins were exchanged every day. Counterfeit-

feit coin. A number of ladles, files, tools, some antimony and powdered glass were seized. Cotsobelas was arraigned before United States Commissioner Shields, and was held on \$5,000 bail. Chief Hazen says that the prisoner is a member of the Greek banditti, of which John Zigourus, who was yesterday sentenced to death by Recorder Goff for the murder of Serranto Ferrantos, was the leader. Cotsobelas is about 35 years of age, and says he has been in this country nearly two years (New York Times)."

Ferrantos had been shot several times at close range for what police believed was an attempt to either extort money from Zigourus and other members of Polycramis' gang, or for being a member of that gang who had a falling out with his cohorts. These Greek criminals clearly elected to be counterfeiters and used the honest pushcart vendors as a cover, and also as unintentional accomplices for their crimes. The trials and tribulations of Greek pushcart workers reveals many unexpected facets of their initial experiences as they struggled to make a living in North America.

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